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“A Little Bit Christian”: Memories of Conversion and Community in Post-Christian
Amazonia

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High “A Little Bit Christian”

ABSTRACT Conversion to Christianity in Amazonia is often described in terms of collective action rather than radically new beliefs interior to the individual. I describe how Waorani people in Ecuador remember the conversion of specific elders as a time of civilization that brought Waorani into a wider social order after a period of violence and isolation. Despite having largely abandoned Christianity since their mass conversion in the 1960s, Waorani today embrace past conversion as a catalyst of social transformation that they say made the present ideal of living in a “community” possible. The individual experiences evoked in memories of collective “civilization” and an insistence on personal autonomy in Waorani visions of community illustrate why the moral commentaries of Waorani Christians remain highly valued in communities where Christianity has ceased to be a dominant social identity.

[conversion to Christianity, memory, temporality, Amazonian personhood, community, Waorani]

RESUMEN La conversión al cristianismo en la Amazonía es a menudo descrita en términos de una acción colectiva más que radicalmente nuevas creencias interiores para el individuo. Describo cómo los waorani en el Ecuador recuerdan la conversión de determinados adultos mayores como un período de “civilización” que trajo a los

waorani a un orden social más amplio después de un período de violencia y aislamiento. A pesar de haber abandonado largamente el cristianismo desde su conversión masiva en los 1960s, los waorani hoy asumen su pasado como un catalizador de transformación social que ellos dicen hizo posible el actual ideal de vivir en comunidad. Las experiencias individuales evocadas en memorias de “civilización” colectiva y una insistencia en autonomía personal en las visiones waorani de comunidad ilustran por qué los comentarios morales de los cristianos waorani permanecen altamente valorados en comunidades donde el cristianismo ha cesado de ser una identidad social dominante. [*conversión al cristianismo, temporalidad de memoria, condición de personas de los Amazonenses, comunidad, Waorani*]

During fieldwork in the Ecuadorian Amazon in 2003, I found myself sitting next to a U.S. Evangelical missionary pilot in his three-passenger Cessna at a frontier airport. As we waited on the runway, anticipating our flight to a Waorani village, he turned to me and my Waorani friend Juan and asked us in Spanish, “Are you Christian?”¹ Preferring not to complicate the matter, I said I was. His attention then turned to Juan, who explained in less than clear Spanish how he had recently attended church with his wife. As the engine revved louder, our pilot repeated his question, “But are you Christian?” Juan responded, “Un poco” [a little], explaining that his father-in-law was a pastor and that, years before, he had become friends with two missionaries in his village. Visibly unsatisfied with this response and raising his voice to compete with the plane’s engine, the missionary asked, “But do you believe in Jesus Christ?!”

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Sensing the growing tension, Juan affirmed that he did, and the pilot then started our course down the runway for take-off.

With the increasing attention to Christianity in Amazonia, anthropologists have described compelling accounts of how indigenous people envision conversion as a way of inserting themselves into a new, idealized social order, whether in the form of millenarian movements, changing relationships with others, or even a sense of becoming like one's ancestors. An emphasis on conversion being about social relations, rather than belief or even religion, is best captured by accounts of people converting en masse, only to abandon or forget about Christianity a few years later (Gow 2006; Vilaça 1997; Viveiros de Castro 2011). These studies suggest that conversion does not necessarily entail adopting radically new values but is part of "a continual attempt to capture external perspectives" (Vilaça 2009:150). Seen as reflecting a "centrifugal" tendency of "other-becoming," an "opening to the other characteristic of Amerindian thought" (Viveiros de Castro 2011:16), collective conversion in Amazonia tends to be understood as the extension of an enduring indigenous cosmology (Vilaça and Wright 2009), even where Christian ideas and practices had become a major part of social life.²

The tendency to view conversion as a collective process rather than an individual one has turned attention away from how experiences of personal rupture come to shape accounts of a shared history (Robbins 2007:11). Even if Amazonian people do not comprehend the individual in terms of a bounded, interior state of being in the ways promoted by Evangelical missionaries, I suggest that paying closer attention to the conversion experiences of particular people and the wider social consequences attributed to them allows for new ways of thinking about

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transformation. Such recognition of the individual requires thinking beyond questions of collective action and the tendency to approach Christian conversion in terms of cultural continuity alone. By attending to the ways in which memories of conversion evoke for Waorani people a sense of both continuity and rupture, I hope to illuminate the temporal trajectories, current relations, and future possibilities they understand to have been set in motion by the conversion of individual elders.

In contrast to the seemingly forgettable character of Christianity described elsewhere in Amazonia, the process of becoming “civilized” Christians through Evangelical conversion in the 1960s is a defining event in Waorani social memory. In the wake of severe population decline and relative isolation after decades of internal revenge killings, many Waorani welcomed missionization as an opportunity to escape internecine warfare and to forge peaceful alliances with outsiders. Today they remember this period of conversion as a time of civilization, when former enemy families and dangerous *kowori* (non-Waorani) people came to live together peacefully at the mission settlement. After the closure of the mission in the early 1980s, few Waorani today embrace being or the prospect of becoming *cristiano* (Christian) in the absence of the missionaries who converted and lived among them in previous decades. For them becoming Christian, more than simply a religious transformation, is closely associated with the experiences of people who came to know and accept specific missionaries at an extraordinary time in the past. And yet, rather than rejecting Christianity or the few remaining Christian elders, Waorani value the past conversion of these Christians because they see civilization as integral to the current emphasis on living in a “community.” Christian elders are respected as exemplary individuals whose conversion made living peacefully in a community possible, even

as the experience of becoming Christian is remote and seemingly inaccessible to younger Waorani generations.

By moving beyond previous anthropological concerns with belief and Christian identity, closer attention to individuated personal experiences highlights why past conversion remains important in predominantly post-Christian Waorani communities. My central question is not whether Waorani people are or ever were real Christian believers but, rather, what it is about missionaries, Christianity, and conversion that interests them today (Gow 2006). The sense of temporal rupture in memories of conversion illustrates Waorani understandings of transformation and highlights the centrality of autonomy and individual experience in Waorani epistemology. Even years after Waorani stopped converting to Christianity, singular experiences of conversion coexist with and complement collective narratives of what it means to be civilized and to live in a community. In this way past conversion is integral to broader social memories of transformation, even after being Christian ceased to be a necessary or desirable identity for most young people. This suggests that we should pay closer attention to how individual experiences figure in memories of collective conversion in post-Christian society.

CONVERTING THE COLLECTIVE AND THE INDIVIDUAL IN AMAZONIA

Anthropologists often take a nonessentialist approach to Christianity, describing the diverse and unpredictable trajectories through which new converts constitute themselves as Christians, especially in non-Western contexts. Rather than a logically coherent system or a monolithic salvationist orthodoxy (Schneider and Lindenbäum 1987), they tend to see Christianity more as a flexible tool for solving problems in

local settings (Barker 1990). Ethnographies of conversion also challenge evolutionist and other teleological arguments that so-called traditional religions impede individual reflection because they are confined to immediate experiences and that world religions offer a rationality that liberates the individual from the shackles of tradition (Hefner 1993). While the social individuation emphasized in Christianity has affinities with the moral narrative of modernity (Keane 2007), anthropological studies of conversion emphasize that a “deeply systematic rationalization” is not “intrinsic to religious conversion” since the ideas and actions of believers do not necessarily reflect the “formal truths embedded in religious doctrine” (Hefner 1993:17–19).³ This suggests that conversion should be understood in terms not simply of external influences but also of preexisting cosmologies, social values, and the new opportunities it offers people to become part of a larger social order (Horton 1971).

Religious conversion offers different things to people beyond purely intellectualist or theological concerns, including new relationships and temporal sensibilities when people enter into a new and often-expanded historical narrative such as Christianity (Keane 2007:115). While the nonessentialism in studies of conversion may be part of the continuity thinking that Joel Robbins argues has prevented deeper anthropological engagement with Christianity as a cultural form, studies from around the world show how Christian conversion can bring a heightened sense of rupture (Robbins 2004, 2007). Whether expressed as a complete break with the past to embrace modernity (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991), ancestral power to reshape the world (Keane 2007), or the experiences of individual converts identified with the transformation of whole societies (Meyer 1998), conversion entails new ways of perceiving transitions between past, present, and future and “questions about the

kinds of agent that produce or hinder transition” (Keane 2007:114). Since the ultimate unit of Christian salvation is the individual, converts can be seen to make new claims about their personal agency in social transformation when they situate themselves at the border between two epochs (Keane 2007:170).

Paying attention to what being Christian and remembering conversion means to Waorani people raises questions about how anthropologists have approached Christianity in Amazonia, where conversion is often understood as an Amazonian transformation rather than a Christian one internal to individual people. While any study of Amazonian Christianities would recognize the fact that missionary activity has led to profound changes, there appears to be a consensus that the transformative impact of conversion is limited by the lack of a clear notion of belief. Peter Gow (2006) notes that whereas missionaries are concerned with conversion as a process of generating belief interior to the individual, Amazonian people tend to understand conversion as a collective social process. In this way Gow and others question whether indigenous Amazonian people experience Christianity as a religion at all. Rather than seeing the creation of a new set of beliefs, they describe how conversion is experienced as an extension of indigenous myth and shamanic practices (Hugh-Jones 1994; Taylor 1981; Vilaça 2015). This is why conversion tends to be temporary and seemingly forgettable to Amazonian people. Rather than constituting a true spiritual transformation, for the Piro people Gow studied in Peru, “Christianity was simply their own cosmology better explained by people who knew more about it” or “a new way of living out an already extant cosmology” (2006:222).

In contrast to other parts of the world, studies of Amazonia have given relatively little attention to Christian ethnotheologies (Scott 2005) or to how Christianity expands or challenges the native cosmos (Robbins 2009). In approaching

conversion as being fundamentally about relationships incorporated into a preexisting cosmological framework (Vilaça and Wright 2009) rather than theology, descriptions of what it means to be Christian in Amazonia tend to support a nonessentialist approach to the anthropology of Christianity. The story of Waorani conversion to and general abandonment of Christianity highlights the importance of recognizing the individual, in one form or another, in these processes, even in a place where bodies and persons are understood to be the product of collective action. Waorani describe the singular actions of specific converts as constituting a radical break with the past that made a new way of life possible.

A prominent example of how conversion in Amazonia is described in terms of collective action is Aparecida Vilaça's work with the Wari', who converted en masse in the 1970s before abandoning Christianity a decade later. Vilaça describes how, by embracing the missionaries' proposal to live together as Christian brothers, Wari' conversion had more to do with the notion of creating a shared consanguineal body than it did with Christian conceptions of belief. Rather than taking a serious interest in Christian beliefs, for the Wari' "adherence to Christianity was only effective if it was shared by the family and the group as a whole" (Vilaça 1997:96). This observation points to a wider theme in regional scholarship: the efforts of Amazonian people to create sameness out of an encompassing cosmos of dangerous alterity (Viveiros de Castro 2001) or, in Vilaça's terms, making kin out of others (2002).

Beyond studies of Christianity in particular, Amazonian kinship and personhood have been theorized in contrast to ideas of the individual. Instead of what is often assumed to be the relatively stable, autonomous, and bounded Western individual, anthropologists describe how in Amazonia a person is understood to be the product of ongoing social action. Rather than a fixed and bounded essential state

based on birth, descent, or lineage, people are made and transformed in life by the collective actions of their kin.⁴ In this way they are involved in a constant process of becoming as they create and maintain ties with others (Conklin and Morgan 1996).⁵ As Magnus Course observes, in this process “relations of difference are deconstructed and reforged as relations of identity, of kinship, through practices such as commensality and conviviality, practices that create shared bodies and thus a shared perspective” (2014:147). If in Amazonia a person is made through collective acts of living together, it is no surprise that people tend to experience conversion as a collective process of becoming—rather than a relatively permanent state of individual self-realization or faith.

In describing a second wave of Wari’ conversion since the early 2000s, Vilaça addresses the difficulty of locating the individual in Amazonia. She observes that among precontact Wari’ “there was nothing like a ‘self’ identity to be possessed since this identity was contextual, produced on the basis of a relation determined by the outside” (Robbins et al. 2014:576). However, among young people in exclusively Christian contexts, there is “a movement towards a singularization of the person through the constitution of an inner self” (Robbins et al. 2014:578). And yet even Wari’ Christians associate the bounded persons of Euro-American individualism with a sterile state of being that can be experienced only posthumously (Vilaça 2011:256). In this context Vilaça attributes to the Wari’ “a non-individualized idea of morality” since conversion is a collective process and sinning is seen as a “failure in relationships” rather than a personal failure (Robbins et al. 2014:578).

The argument for the absence of individualism in Amazonia, perhaps best illustrated by Vilaça’s account of its circumscribed conceptualization by Wari’

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Christians, points to why studies of Amazonia tend to have little to say about questions of belief that are often such a major concern for missionaries and anthropologists of Christianity elsewhere. As Gow notes, “Amazonian cosmologies are based not on belief, but on experiential knowledge” (2006:222). The absence of belief makes clear why Amazonian people have so readily abandoned Christianity after mass conversions. They appear to experience conversion not as a permanent religious transformation interior to the individual but as an ongoing collective process of becoming other (Vilaça 2015; Vilaça and Wright 2009). This emphasis on “producing a relationship with the other ... to transform their own identity” is indicative of what Eduardo Viveiros de Castro identifies as the centrifugal character of Amerindian cosmology (2011:30). Put simply, if Amazonian Christianity has little to do with individuals or belief, there is little reason to think of conversion and subsequent deconversion as a matter of religious change.

This focus on collective conversion should not lead us to ignore the emphasis that Waorani and other indigenous Amazonian people place on personal autonomy. While close ties of mutuality are created and maintained by living together, there is less attention to how a seemingly anarchic insistence on individual autonomy is conjoined with an emphasis on becoming “a community of similars” (Overing 2003:300). Joanna Overing observes that in contrast to the radically interiorized Western notion of self and “the dominant strand of our own individualism that states the superiority of the disengaged ego,” in Amazonia personal autonomy is a social capacity through which such a community is created. In this way the collective or the social, rather than a coercive force, is “deeply dependent upon the creation of individual trusting relationships” (Overing 2003:299, 306, 310). For Overing, the issue is not whether the individual is absent in Amazonia but instead our tendency to

equate the social with coercive force and to assume an institutional solidity against which people express a longing for individual freedom.⁶

While autonomy is a social capacity integral to the making of “a community of similars,” personal autonomy is also central to how knowledge and power are conceived in relatively egalitarian Amazonian societies like the Waorani. In a context where overt coercion and hierarchical forms of authority are all but absent, knowledge is understood to result from the private experiences of individual people, to the extent that people rarely claim to know the thoughts or reasoning of others (Conklin and Morgan 1996; Walker 2013). This epistemology suggests that Christian conversion, like other transformations, involves something more than a collective process of becoming. Even where conversion appears to be collective, we should attend to the ways in which people understand it as a deeply personal rupture.

The focus on mass conversion and the particularities of personhood in indigenous Amazonia has turned attention away from the fact that conversion is not always a collective process—nor do all Amazonian people deconvert. Indigenous Amazonian people have experienced diverse forms of Christianity. In many cases, particularly where the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) and other Protestant missions have operated, missionaries have removed a small group of young people from their community. These converts, who are typically recruited to assist in Bible translation, often acquire key political and economic roles as cultural brokers between their communities and outsiders (Pollock 1993:173). Donald Pollock argues that “in Amazonia conversion to Christianity appears to have taken place primarily among individuals within small groups, not throughout whole villages or cultures” (1993:172). My intention here is not to reconcile Pollock’s observation with accounts

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of collective conversion, other than to note that mass conversions are surely preceded by the kind of individual involvement he describes. This was certainly the case for Waorani conversion. My interest lies in the experiences of those people who converted and what past events of personal rupture mean to their kin and neighbors who subsequently abandoned Christianity.

Even if the few remaining Waorani Christians aren't the bounded individuals familiar to us, their autobiographical narratives and present identity as *cristianos* set them apart from other Waorani people. While being Christian individuates them in terms of their past experiences and their observation of a relatively strict regime of personal conduct, they are no less part of the sociality traditionally described in Amazonia. If anything, Waorani see *cristianos* as emblematic of cultural continuity in moral conduct and for this reason often associate them with ancestral practices. Christian elders are simultaneously associated with this continuity and the rupture that Waorani say made living in a community possible. Their personalized stories of conversion raise questions about how the differentiating status of *cristianos* fits into a post-Christian context, where people tend to both reject Christian identity and value past conversion as integral to a wider process they remember as civilization and embrace in the current ideal of community.

While studies of Amazonian personhood have presented certain contrasts to Western thought, the absence of singular personalities and the effects of their actions has to some extent limited studies of conversion. Although conversion is remembered in certain contexts as a collective action, it is also associated with remarkable stories and temporal ruptures brought about by singular people. As Ellen Basso (1995) describes, in Amazonian oral histories these key figures can be remembered as having

opened or expanded the boundaries of community.⁷ They are not somehow cut off from the relational contexts of which they are part but emerge from them at particular moments with the improvisations and innovations of individual subjects (Humphrey 2008). The singularities that emerge in accounts of Waorani conversion coexist with a deeply sociocentric notion of personhood, even as acts of becoming Christian opened up a previously unimaginable world of civilization. In this way Waorani associate conversion with specific people who made a radical break with the past, with far-reaching effects up to the present.

WAORANI AND THE MISSION

The precursor to Waorani conversion was an encounter that became a household story about Evangelism in the United States in the second half of the twentieth century. In 1956 five U.S. missionaries landed a small aircraft on a bank of the Curaray River in Ecuador, where they were speared to death by the Waorani people they hoped to evangelize. This event, and the subsequent efforts of the missionaries' relatives to establish a mission among the killers, made Waorani (then called Aucas) a focal point for Evangelical missionaries around the world.⁸ Associated primarily with violence and resistance to contact with outsiders, Waorani became the target of a highly publicized evangelical mission campaign by the Summer Institute of Linguistics. The conversion of many Waorani made this a powerful story about how a supposedly wild people finally came to be civilized once missionaries managed to share the word of God with them. What was remarkable about this story for many North Americans and to some extent for Waorani people themselves was the fact that the two women who founded the mission were close relatives of the missionaries killed in 1956. These

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women, Rachel Saint (sister of one of the missionaries) and Elizabeth Elliott (widow of another), were celebrated as making the ultimate sacrifice so that the word of God would finally reach Waorani. Not only had they lost close kin to Waorani violence, they were willing to risk life and limb to carry on the mission project.

The mission had transformative effects on the lives of Waorani people. Though extraordinary in terms of its international backing (Stoll 1982), the results were similar to those in other parts of Amazonia. Translating the Bible into the Waorani language was of central concern to the missionaries, who established the first Waorani schools. Despite the difficulties of bringing rival groups together to live in a single settlement, with the new diseases and dependencies that followed, the majority of Waorani people had converted to Christianity by the 1970s and regularly attended church services at the mission settlement (Yost 1981). For the missionaries and the wider public who read popular books about this miraculous conversion, this civilizing process was about Waorani people embracing biblical teaching and, above all, believing in God. This is why, as elsewhere, the missionaries made such an effort to translate the Bible into the Waorani language.

One of the reasons that this case of conversion became famous was its relative success, in the eyes both of a Western public and of many Waorani. The mission coincided with a major decrease in violence between rival groups, who had been embroiled in an intense series of revenge killings that had reduced the total population to around five or six hundred. For Waorani, becoming civilized meant ending these feuds, living alongside former enemies at the mission, and becoming *cristianos*. The mission also brought them unprecedented access to foreign manufactured goods and facilitated interethnic marriages between Waorani and Quichua-speaking indigenous people from surrounding areas (Yost 1981), placing them in a wider network of

affinity and exchange that has continued and expanded up to the present day. For the missionaries, the whole point of conversion was the hope that a new belief would take hold as an interior state of personal conviction—specifically with reference to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Despite the difficulties of communication, an outbreak of polio, and growing tensions with the increasing scale of the mission settlement, by the time the mission was exiled from Ecuador in 1981 it had attracted the majority of Waorani as converts, and several had become pastors.

By the time I began fieldwork in the mid-1990s, few Waorani described themselves as *cristianos*, and the local church built by the missionaries decades before had fallen into disrepair. Above all, it seemed that the idea of being Christian had ceased to be a relevant category for contemplating social life in the absence of missionaries. Like the “Christians without faith” described by Vilaça (1997) and Viveiros de Castro’s account of 16th-century Tupinamba (2011), it appeared that Waorani mass conversion was a temporary and more or less superficial change that had little to do with the deeply spiritual transformation envisioned by the missionaries. In Viveiros de Castro’s terms, in contrast to the missionaries’ hopes that conversion would constitute a complete and permanent form of belief according to the kinds of enduring identities and wholes by which we tend to imagine culture, tradition, or religious systems, Waorani conversion appeared to reflect the centrifugal tendency of people like the Tupinamba to become other.

For the missionaries, postmission life among Waorani has proved to be a failed utopia, a world poisoned by indigenous politics and contact with other Ecuadorians. North American Evangelicals who are invested in this history of conversion and continue to visit Waorani communities describe the current state of affairs in precisely this way, with particular disdain for an indigenous politics that has

coincided with Waorani becoming more deeply embedded in the national society. And yet for many Waorani, post-Christian life is not really a failed utopia, nor is Christian conversion devoid of meaning. Even if being Christian isn't something they find attractive today, conversion is part of a wider narrative of the time of civilization they say established the possibility of living in a community. In this way, conversion is as much a part of collective memory as other stories about the ways of the ancient ones, even if it expresses a different temporality.

BECOMING CIVILIZED CHRISTIANS

Although being Christian became undesirable to most Waorani after the departure of key missionaries, specific people who converted at the mission continue to embrace Christianity, read the Bible, and occasionally give sermons. Although these Christians are a small minority, they are respected as village *pikenani* (elders). In fact, as elders and as people who often have misgivings about much of what they associate with the *kowori* (non-Waorani) world, such as alcohol and commerce, these conservative Waorani Christians are described by young people as being deeply traditional—they often refer to them respectfully as being *durani bai* (like the ancient ones). They are also described as being Christian for specific reasons, whether the result of being an orphan who sought refuge at the mission, embracing specific Christian teachings, or having maintained friendships with specific North American missionaries.

The most well known of these Christians is Dayuma, who fled her family after a series of revenge killings and was discovered by missionaries while living on a plantation in the 1950s (see Figure 1). As the first Waorani convert, she joined Saint and Elliott in establishing the mission and helped garner support for it by touring the United States with Saint. Dayuma is known for her role in attracting Waorani to the

mission and negotiating interethnic marriages between Waorani and neighboring Quichua people, with whom they had prolonged violent conflicts (Yost 1981). Although she was often imagined by outsiders as a chief or matriarch, Waorani describe Dayuma less as a leader than as someone whose experience with *kowori* people and Christian conversion was a catalyst of what they call civilization. Dayuma died in 2014, having spent much of her adult life living with Rachel Saint in a Waorani village.⁹ While most Waorani know about Dayuma's story of conversion, her identity as a Christian has a less prominent place in Waorani social memory than her role in civilization. Christians like Dayuma are seen as having forged a new way of life with which Waorani today generally identify and project into an imagined future, even if not a specifically Christian one. While other elders also converted, her decision to live among *kowori* people whom Waorani then defined as cannibal enemies—an act of virtual suicide—is understood to have transformed the boundaries and possibilities of Waorani social life.

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

The experiences of people like Dayuma are part of a wider Waorani narrative of the time of civilization that began with missionization. Elders and teenagers alike say that civilization created the possibility of living alongside former enemies and foreigners, a stark contrast to the group depletion, separation, and dispersed households they describe in narratives of precontact violence. For many Waorani it marked the beginning of a period of relative peace, the remaking of lost alliances and the expansion of their population to today's approximately 25 hundred people. Waorani often comment on how their villages have since grown large and full of children. Whether in reference to the time of civilization or the specific stories of

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people who remain Christian today, memories of conversion are inseparable from Waorani understandings of present and future possibilities. Beyond simply a way of relating the past, their accounts of becoming *civilizados* attribute a moral value to present relationships and an imagined future. Although Waorani value civilization as something experienced more or less collectively in the past, being Christian today is not a collective act, nor is it forgotten. Stories of civilization are about rupture insofar as Waorani, including young people, see the conversion of specific elders as marking the beginning of their current life as civilized people who live together. But they also convey continuity in the sense that Christian elders, in their conservatism, are seen as having the knowledge and skills of their ancestors.

Through their views and teachings, Christian elders address the problems and ideals of village life (see Figure 2). One of these is Gaba, a man who described to me how he sought refuge at the mission with his mother after most of their family were killed in a raid by a downriver group. Since his mother died of illness soon after contact at the mission, Gaba grew up there and became a pastor, a role he continues to hold as one of the few Christians in his village. Waorani often describe him as an orphan, a status associated with the anger of those who seek to avenge kin killed in raids. For Gaba's kin, his identity as a *cristiano* is closely associated with being an orphan who later established enduring relationships with missionaries, which he maintains today with specific families in the United States. He is best known, however, for what Waorani explain as an extraordinary act of forgiveness inseparable from his status as a *cristiano*, having befriended one of the men who killed his father and abducted his sister years ago. For many Waorani, the fact that his sister remains married to one of the men who participated in killing their father some five decades later is a testament to Gaba's status as a Christian and to the role that converts of his

generation played in civilization. His sermons and speeches at village meetings offer moral commentary on a range of issues, such as the denunciation of alcohol, witchcraft, and laziness and the promotion of monogamy and the generous hosting of visitors. Aware that few of his kin and neighbors are *cristianos*, Gaba offers what others understand as Christian values and solutions to what Waorani call *problemas* (problems) in the village.

[Figure 2 about here]

What became clear in the early 2000s was a more or less comfortable fit between Gaba's Christian ways and the wider interests of non-Christians in his village—at least those of his generation. I often heard Gaba at church and elsewhere make public statements in support of monogamy, extolling the virtues of being with just *oroki okie* (one woman). His commentary evoked the ways in which missionaries tried to convince Waorani to end their practice of polygamy. Since polygamous marriages are now rare, Gaba spoke more directly to the *problema* of sexual jealousy caused by infidelity. Like his warnings against drinking, stealing, and witchcraft, his calls for men and women to work as hunters and gardeners and not leave their children hungry were often cast in support of *waponi kiwimonipa* (living well). Though promoted by Christians like Gaba, Waorani do not see living well strictly in terms of a Christian rupture; instead they say these values are consistent with the ways of their ancestors, whom they describe as having been hard-working, generous providers of meat and unfermented manioc beer.

In a broadly post-Christian context today, these values are integral to what elders and young people alike call *comunidad* (community). Just as they remember civilization as having eclipsed the previous period of violence and isolation, Waorani celebrate community as an ongoing process of engaging productively with rival

families and *kowori* people. While the mission encouraged a more sedentary life to facilitate evangelization, *comunidad* is part of a broader discourse promoted by schoolteachers and other state authorities in Ecuador. In contrast to popular stereotypes that attribute a natural unity to indigenous groups as communities, Waorani envision *comunidad* as a delicate balance of participating in a limited range of collective practices with various others while maintaining personal and household autonomy. Whether in everyday conversation, village meetings, or church services, they evoke *comunidad* in discussions of how to resolve or prevent potential conflicts in the village. They embrace in *comunidad* an ideal of living peacefully, having larger families, and ultimately becoming part of a broader sphere of relations. One man repeatedly emphasized to me how, in contrast to the witchcraft and revenge killings of the past, living in a *comunidad* has allowed his family to grow large and live well. In discussions of *comunidad*, adult women often describe proudly how they are able to provide abundant food for visitors at community feasts. Schools are part of this ideal, since they draw students and new households to a village. Just as Waorani value civilization as a past event when converts like Dayuma forged new and productive links with outsiders, *comunidad* projects a similar ideal into an imagined future (see Figure 3).

[Figure 3 about here]

Christian elders are generally respected and understood in terms of the specific experiences of individual people. Yet few young people are interested in being Christian, perhaps because *cristianos* are closely associated with restrictions on behavior. While the idea of not drinking alcohol, dancing, or having sex with multiple partners might resonate well with older adults, it is less appealing to adolescents whose lives are more closely tied to the new attractions of popular Ecuadorian culture.

Since Waorani notions of being Christian, civilized, and living in a community connote a sense of creating or becoming part of a wider set of relations, it appears that the decline in Christian identity has to some extent coincided with the idea of being Ecuadorian. As missionaries were the outsiders with whom Waorani had most regular contact in the initial years of mission settlement, becoming Christians was centrally about living with Christian missionaries. While some of the original converts remain, Waorani have since become part of a more varied constellation of intercultural relations. Being Ecuadorian and living in a community are more salient categories in a world of village schools run in Spanish, temporary employment with oil companies, indigenous politics, and migration to frontier towns. And yet even young non-Christian Waorani appear to value past conversions, both as singular accounts of elders like Dayuma and Gaba and as a collective narrative of civilization.

Christian conversion is often couched in broader narratives of civilization and victimhood, since being an object of aggression is a key theme in expressions of what it means to be a Waorani person (High 2015a; Rival 2002). There is evidence that Waorani people accepted the original missionaries in part because they came to understand them as kin of victims, much like Waorani see themselves (see Figure 4). This supports the more general observation in Amazonia that indigenous thought seems to have already had a place for new others before they arrived. However, biblical notions of martyrdom and self-sacrifice also have a presence in social memory. Waorani sometimes frame spear killings in much the same terms as the death of Jesus—as a kind of ultimate act of self-sacrifice for the benefit of others, suggesting that certain aspects of Christian theology have become part of oral history and current thinking (High 2009a).

[Figure 4 about here]

One exemplary person in narratives of civilization is Toña, an early Waorani convert who was killed attempting to evangelize a downriver Waorani group. Toña, who was tricked and speared while visiting Waorani who refused mission settlement, is famous for having foretold his death and forgiven his killers while he was dying. He figures prominently in stories about how mission settlement allowed Waorani to escape long-standing vendettas and become civilized. The Christian overtones in his story resonate still today, even for Waorani who do not identify as *cristianos*. In emphasizing Toña's extraordinary effort to civilize other Waorani, one man quoted him saying to his attackers as he died, "I die so that you should no longer kill." Toña is remembered as an iconic victim of violence by which Waorani define themselves collectively and as a singular person whose efforts to convert an enemy group had never been seen before. Naming the largest Waorani village after him points to how this event remains present in Waorani thinking about civilization and community. As with Gaba, the idea of forgiving or not avenging past killings is part of how many adults envision the process they call *civilización*. Being *civilizado* is valued precisely because it refers to how an intense period of past revenge killings was transcended and former enemy groups began living in closer proximity at the mission settlement.

The link between memories of civilization and the future orientation of *comunidad* becomes clear in Waorani discussions of so-called uncontacted groups who refused missionization and continue to defend their relative isolation. After a massacre was carried out against these people by a group of Waorani men in 2003, *cristiano* elders condemned the killings and discussed launching a mission to civilize the survivors, drawing a parallel between their own past and the potential to incorporate isolated groups into a relationship they define as *comunidad*. Without proposing to convert them to Christianity, *cristianos* were not alone in seeing in these

groups both the perils of isolation (High 2013) and an opportunity to draw them into an expanding social order. While Waorani generally remember civilization and conversion as having opened up radically new possibilities to live among others, *comunidad* projects a powerful sense of growth and expansion into the future.

REMEMBERING CONVERSION IN A POST-CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

Like other Amazonian people who seem to have lost interest in Christianity, Waorani more or less abandoned the idea of becoming Christian once the presence of missionaries diminished. But what interests me is why, in contrast to people like the Piro described by Peter Gow, past conversion continues to be so important to them, particularly in their discussions of community. Gow argues that Piro people “forgot” their conversion because they failed to see this process as a “powerful tool for thinking about their past” (2006:237). For Waorani, memories of Christian conversion are a powerful tool for thinking about the relationships between past, present, and future. Even young men, who in some contexts publicly celebrate the warriorhood often attributed to their ethnic group (High 2009b), explain that conversion allowed their elders to become civilized. This historical process is not just valued for its association with transcending past vendettas; it is also a measure of contemporary social life shared between elders and young people, whether or not they are Christian.

The close links between past conversion, civilization, and community help explain why non-Christian Waorani occasionally attend church and hold the moral commentaries of Christian elders in high regard. Many of them share Gaba’s and the late Dayuma’s concerns about witchcraft, theft, and *kowori* people, even if they do not follow their advice about sexuality and drinking. When asked about Christianity and church services, some adults, including close kin of Waorani pastors, say they are *un*

poco cristiano (a little bit Christian). As with Juan's response to the missionary pilot in the opening vignette, I think they mean this quite literally. They may not read the Bible regularly as believers do, but they sometimes attend church and follow the advice of sermons regarding moral conduct. The idea of being a little bit Christian should also be understood in the context of the occasional visits from missionaries, church groups, and religious organizations that bring gifts to families who associate themselves with the church. This can involve singing Christian songs, memorizing passages from the Bible, or taking week-long trips to Christian camps. I do not suggest that Waorani simply pretend to be Christian when they do these things. When they say they are a little bit Christian, they mean just that: they do some things that Christians do and accept much of biblical teaching, but they do not associate themselves with the singular events of conversion that made certain elders Christian. The moral commentaries of *cristianos* do, however, convey what other people see as key aspects of what it means to live in a *comunidad* (see Figure 5).

[Figure 5 about here]

Given that conversion has been described as a seemingly collective all-or-nothing act elsewhere in Amazonia, and given the missionary zeal by which Christianity was introduced to Waorani, it is striking how *cristianos* are both set apart as extraordinary people and embraced as integral to the moral fabric of what it means to live in a community. Particularly striking to me, given my conversations with North American and Ecuadorian Protestant missionaries during fieldwork, is the general lack of proselytizing by Waorani Christians. Some of them, including the most prominent pastor in one village, are the only Christians in their households. Despite their central place in the community, there appears to be little expectation that their spouses or children will convert to Christianity. While this initially seemed

somewhat odd to me, I came to understand this state of affairs in terms of a Waorani emphasis on autonomy that coexists with the ideal of community.

While much has been made of how Amazonian kinship and personhood are created, distributed, and maintained intentionally through acts of sharing and conviviality (Overing and Passes 2000), Waorani people tend to think about decisions and intentions in highly individualized ways. Although a *nanicabo* (household) acquires a shared consanguineal body from living, eating, and drinking together (Rival 1998), people seldom make explicit demands on others. They understand the expectations that come with being part of a *nanicabo*, such as sharing in dietary taboos when a household member falls ill or contributing to the household economy according to differences in age and gender. And yet there is little scope in this relatively egalitarian context for the kinds of coercion associated with noticeably hierarchical forms of leadership (High 2007). Waorani pastors are not described as leaders, even as their neighbors respect them as parents, community members, and *cristianos*. Although one might expect their literacy and connections with outsiders to make them desirable candidates for participation in indigenous politics, as far as I know none of the elected presidents of the Waorani political organization have been *cristianos*.

Central to the interplay of autonomy and mutuality that constitutes *comunidad* is an epistemology that appears to have considerable reach in Amazonia. In a context where knowledge and power are often inseparable from the private experiences of individuals (High 2012; Walker 2013), Waorani rarely claim knowledge about or answer for the intentions of other people. Harry Walker similarly notes that among the Urarina in Peruvian Amazonia, “underlying this refusal to presume to know the thoughts of another” is a sense that speaking on behalf of another would be “an

infraction of personal autonomy” (2013:122). Beth Conklin and Lynn Morgan describe how the Wari’ “acknowledge the separateness of individuals in the idea that the interior self is unknowable to others” and therefore “seldom speculate on the motives behind someone’s actions, but simply invoke the uniqueness of each individual” (1996:682). In this way, people are reluctant to state even the most basic reasoning behind the decisions and actions of others. Such an emphasis on personal autonomy and the opacity of individual thoughts to others sheds light on why Waorani *cristianos* are both highly individualized in terms of their experiences of conversion and integral to *comunidad*. In Waorani thinking, conversion involved the extraordinary experiences of specific people whose actions made the current period of living in a civilized community possible.

Waorani descriptions of singular experiences in past conversion, alongside an emphasis on personal autonomy, illustrate why it would be misleading to think of conversion as an entirely collective process and why *cristianos* do not expect their immediate family members to become Christians like themselves. For Waorani, learning and becoming are ideally tied to decisions people make for themselves—even if they are not precisely the bounded, self-realizing, or enlightened individuals of Western imagination. It would thus make little sense to try to convince another person to become Christian, any more than it would be to try to convince teenagers to do their homework. In a context where power resides more in autonomous thoughts and intentions than in social institutions, and where knowing and being are seemingly inseparable (High 2012), people should learn relatively autonomously through their own experiences or by choosing to be in the presence of others with desired abilities, rather than through coercive authority. Children are expected to learn to hunt and make gardens by joining capable adults, just as they should learn the ways of *kowori*

people by reading, writing, and speaking in Spanish in the presence of teachers at school (High 2015b).

Similarly, becoming *cristiano* is not something to convince someone to be by conveying a religious doctrine that others should follow. Rather than attempting to convert their neighbors or even their own children, *cristianos* are involved in creating what they see as a world that ultimately benefits everyone. They are by their own description believers, and the fact that they continue to preach their faith as a small minority testifies to the deep and enduring nature of their belief. *Cristianos* are believers in ways that would be familiar to most Western Christians, as their beliefs reside in biblical teachings they have accepted and preached for decades. What is absent here is not belief or the individual but the epistemological side of evangelism whereby souls are to be saved regardless of the different experiences of specific people. Though *cristianos* see their faith as something available to all, to other Waorani it is the result of a highly individualized event inseparable from the history of civilization.

Waorani memories of conversion and the continued references to civilization in their current emphasis on living in a community connote a temporal sensibility that attributes a high degree of agency to individual Christian converts in effecting social transformation. Rather than a claim made by Christians themselves, it is primarily the younger generations of non-Christian Waorani who attribute to them the event of civilization and the moral authority to create community. Instead of rejecting the precontact past altogether or embracing a notion of modernity, the ideal of community simultaneously celebrates a sense of radical change associated with civilization and a heightened sense of continuity with the ancient ones. As Webb Keane notes, “perceptions of continuity are inseparable from concepts of change and the stances

toward the future they make possible” (2007:146). Even as young Waorani associate the few remaining Christian elders with autonomous experiences of past conversion, they value conversion as something that ultimately propelled Waorani people into a larger social order they describe in terms of living in a community and being Ecuadorian.

For young people today, being Christian is not only an undesirable way to be Ecuadorian; it’s also not entirely accessible to them in terms of their own experiences. When I asked the adult son of one pastor why he himself is not *cristiano* despite occasionally attending church, he responded that his father is a believer because he came to know *kowori* missionaries at the time of civilization. He explained that being Christian is something he simply doesn’t know in the same way as his father, whom he praises as a skilled hunter and an active supporter of the *comunidad*. Much as young people fail to live up to the image of warriorhood associated with their ancestors (High 2010), conversion to Christianity is more social memory than something their own experiences can relate to. What is accessible to them—and much more desirable than being *cristiano*—is *comunidad*. By remembering conversion as a civilizing process, young people, along with elders, lay claim to this ideal by which they project themselves into the future.

CONCLUSION

I hope to have shown that paying attention to the differentiating experiences of individual people allows us to see the transformational character of conversion to Christianity, even in a post-Christian context where the attraction of being *cristiano* has all but disappeared. The conversion stories of elders speak of the far-reaching consequences of these events through which Waorani people have come to define

themselves and their present way of life. The sense of rupture in memories of conversion illustrates Waorani understandings of transformation and highlights the centrality of autonomy and singular experiences in Waorani epistemology. Even if Waorani people do not view their Christian kin and neighbors in terms of the individualism familiar to Western scholars, they understand conversion as an event that opened up the radical new opportunities and challenges of civilization and living in a community.

One of the challenges for Waorani people today is to reconcile being Ecuadorian with the values promoted by *cristianos* and others invested in the idea of community, especially when ideals of abundance, sharing, and autonomy are neither straightforward nor easily achievable. As Waorani become increasingly part of a national society where a predominantly Catholic religious and national identity is often stated in opposition to being Christian, being *cristiano* is an ever-less-relevant mode of identification. While specific elders constituted themselves as *cristianos* through a leap into the previously unknown world of civilization, the ideal of *comunidad* made possible by this rupture and popular images of Amazonian warriors are disparate yet joined tools with which Waorani meet the challenges of contemporary social life.

Regardless of the radical differences between Amazonian cosmology and the notion of belief common to many religions, conversion to Christianity is in fact memorable to some Amazonian people. We should understand this process in terms not just of indigenous cosmology or questions of identity but also of what past conversions mean to people and the temporal trajectories of which they are part. As Michael Scott (2005) suggests, “If anthropologists want to study how Christianity introduces logical trajectories wherever people grapple with it, we must engage with

the premises of these trajectories in their own terms” (2005:106). I hope to have shown that these trajectories are also important for understanding post-Christian societies, where memories of conversion can evoke a sense of continuity and rupture by which people define their present relationships and imagine future possibilities. Waorani memories of conversion evoke not just a collective act of becoming Christian but also remarkable personal experiences that have come to define the present mode of life in terms of being civilized and living in a community. They suggest that understanding conversion and other transformations on their own terms involves recognizing the moments when singular subjects emerge as catalysts of past ruptures and potential futures.

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NOTES

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1. Most of the names of people described in this article are pseudonyms.
2. These approaches were inspired by Claude Lévi-Strauss's idea that an "opening to the other" is fundamental to the dualism he described in Amerindian mythology (1995).
3. Louis Dumont argues that the individualism often attributed to Christianity, in which the independent and autonomous individual, rather than society, "is a paramount value," emerged only with the Protestant Reformation and particularly the "inwardly" individualism of Calvin (1985:94).
4. Beth Conklin and Lynn Morgan observe that the distinction anthropologists often draw between "Western individualism" and sociocentric "relationality" in non-Western contexts is overstated, since certain degrees of individuation and relationality are found in all models of personhood (1996:659). In questioning the tendency to oversimplify contrasts between the individual and the dividual in studies of conversion specifically, Mark Mosko argues that the "bounded possessive individual" often attributed to Christianity "is just one aspect of a wider encompassing form of personhood" that has certain analogies to Melanesian dividuality (2010:217).
5. Aparecida Vilaça (2011) draws parallels between the partible and unstable notion of the person in Amazonia and the fractal or dividual person that figures prominently in Melanesianist scholarship (Strathern 1988; Wagner 1991).
6. Harry Walker similarly observes that the emphasis on both individualism and the relational character of the self in indigenous Amazonia is contradictory only if seen through the lens of a Western model of the person (2013:11).

7. Caroline Humphrey (2008) notes that a broader dissatisfaction with the concept of the individual across the social sciences should not take attention away from how people talk about the extraordinary deeds of singular subjects.
8. Aucas, a derogatory term meaning wild or savage people, is still sometimes used in Ecuador to refer to Waorani and other indigenous Amazonian peoples.
9. Until her death in 1994, Saint continued to live with Waorani long after the formal closure of the mission.

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CAPTIONS FOR HIGH ESSAY

FIGURE 1. *Dayuma at her home in 2008.*

FIGURE 2. *A cristiano elder preaches to his community in 2005.*

FIGURE 3. *The comunidad: an aerial view of a Waorani village.*

FIGURE 4. *A memorial to Rachel Saint in the village of Toñampari with biblical translation.*

FIGURE 5. *A Waorani church congregation.*